

Africa is Sharply Divided. Contradictory Relations with Russia

Perspectives From African Policy Experts

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With geopolitical confrontation and tensions deepening, the key global players are swiftly turning their focus on Africa. In practical terms, African leaders are also making strategic choices based on their development paradigms. These leaders have to work on their election campaign promises, especially those relating to economic development and set comprehensive targets for improving performance. After the presidential terms it is necessary to show significant success and achievements as guarantee for holding their high-political positions to the electorate and the people.

Ultimately in the pursuit of the tasks, African leaders are exploring ways for effective external collaboration to transforming untapped resources, modernise agriculture, add value by industrialising and, of course, to create employment for the youth and the growing new generation. Following anti-Western slogans will definitely not guarantee the expected development. On the other side, African leaders themselves have to act with wisdom, with genuine external partners, in developing the African continent for its 1.3 billion population.

At this stage of Africa's development, is it rather necessary to examine thoroughly how the geopolitical changes are influencing Africa's unity and development, how it is impacting on African countries across the continent. In practical terms, the time has arrived to look at the development processes and review obstacles, control and monitor the participation of foreign players and think of the role in the emerging new world as well as the practical implications for Africa.

There are glaring indications that Africa is sharply divided, diverse conflicts are taking its heavy toll on developments there. Several years have elapsed after the United Nations declared Africa's political independence. It is more 60 years, but Africa is still far away from attaining its economic status despite the huge natural and human resources. The resources

are largely untapped, while about 60% of the population impoverished.

Some say leadership attitudes and approach are holding back development in Africa, others blame external factors including the opaque relations adopted by foreign players. In many cases, African leaders continue to have most extensive bilateral relationships with their former colonial powers. On the opposite direction, Russia and China are critical of Western and European connections to Africa. At least, China has given appreciably huge support in upgrading infrastructure. Russia has only embarked on fighting “neo-colonialism” which it considers a barrier on its way to regain part of Soviet-era influence in Africa.

Nevertheless, the South African Institute of International Affairs has released its latest policy report on Russia-African relations. This report noted aspects of the narratives about anti-colonialism and described how these sources of solidarity are transmitted by Russian elites to the African public.

For seeking long-term influence, Russian elites have oftentimes used elements of anti-colonialism as part of its current policy to control the perceptions of Africans and primarily as new tactics for power projection in Africa. While Russia has been struggling to make inroads into Africa these years, the only symbolic event was the first Russia-Africa summit held in Sochi, which fêted heads of state from 43 African countries and showcased Moscow’s great power ambitions.

“Russia is still a very small economic player in Africa. The size of trade – about \$17 bn in 2021 – is roughly the same as Turkey’s, half of the United States, and many times smaller than China and the European Union. There is room for growth, but sanctions make this more difficult,” according to Steven Gruzd, Head of African Governance and Diplomacy Programme, and Head of the Africa-Russia Research Project at the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA).

In addition, Steven Gruzd wrote in his emailed comment that “anti-Western slogans are still prevalent in Russian communication to Africa, which still clearly have some relevance and resonance. But, Africa needs trade and investment more than anti-Western slogans and mere policy rhetoric to turn the economic fortunes of the continent around.”

The 2022 report indicates that “Russia’s growing assertiveness in Africa is a driver of instability and that its approach to governance encourages pernicious practices, such as kleptocracy and autocracy in Africa. Undeniably, Moscow is wooing African elites to serve its interests. In the context of a multipolar geopolitical order, Russia’s image of cooperation could be seen as highly enticing, but it is also based on illusions. Better still, Russia’s posture is a clash between illusions and reality. Russia, it appears, is a neo-colonial power dressed in anti-colonial clothes.

Moscow’s strategic incompetence and dominating opaque relations are adversely affecting sustainable developments in Africa. Thus far, Russia looks more like a ‘virtual great power’ than a genuine challenger to European, American and Chinese influence. The second Russia-Africa summit in July 2023 will provide an ideal opportunity to reflect on progress since the inaugural gathering in 2019, and attempt to separate bluster from the concrete facts on the ground.

Many academic researchers and policy experts have been discussing the growth of neo-colonial tendencies, the geopolitical developments and the scramble for resources by

external countries in Africa. An African-American Researcher and Analyst, Lipton Matthews, discussed with me these questions in May. Matthews is associated with Merion West, The Federalist, American Thinker, Intellectual Takeout, Mises Institute, and Imaginative Conservative.

Matthews says generally economic engagement with a more sophisticated foreign power is always in the interests of developing African countries. But such arrangements are futile if there is no transfer of knowledge. Presently, Russia is a blacklisted state and is seen by many in the West as a crumbling empire. Russia would do better if the political system was more responsive to change and dissent.

Despite the respect some African leaders have for Russia, it is not a first-rated power. On the quality of life Index, Russia is at number 70 and in terms of innovation, it is at best a middling power, despite the intellectual quality of its population. That however, Africa countries must seize investment opportunities offered by Russia. Still from many perspectives, Russia is not a role model for aspirational African countries, according to Matthews.

Historically, Western foreign policy was driven by economic and geopolitical motives, but it has digressed to focus on flippant social issues or what some people call “identity politics”. Western countries still boast some of the most dynamic universities and economies in the world. Western leaders these days are focusing on climate change. For example, economic growth in the West was driven by the accessibility of affordable and reliable energy sources, but today through the policy of eco-imperialism, they encourage African countries to invest in less efficient energy sources in the name of averting climate change.

With or without human intervention the climate will change, it has always changed and the effects are both positive and negative. In fact, according to a 2020 study by the Reviews of Geophysics climate pessimism is unjustified. So, obviously African leaders should rebuke the West for proposing insensible climate policies.

But on the other hand, free markets and business reforms promote growth, and Rwanda is experiencing a economic boom, due to economic freedom. Therefore, anti-Western sentiments predicated on anti-market rhetoric ought to be jettisoned. African countries must invest in building human capital and improving the investment climate to secure Western investment.

Lipton Matthews was absolutely right when he said leaders should be unsentimental about doing business and the anti-Western sentiments of delusional activists. Bashing the West for colonialism and slavery can’t lift Africans out of poverty. Notwithstanding the condemnation, Africans should also remember that Africans themselves were responsible for procuring slaves for slaves for Europeans. Now if Russians are assertively fighting growing neo-colonial tendencies, what would African leaders do then?

In particular, Lipton Matthews believes that there is always rivalry in geopolitics. But Russia should assist Africa in transitioning to a knowledge-based economy by promoting technology transfer agreements. Russians must also invest in more R&D collaborations with their African partners. This agreement will revolutionize Africa’s economy and a richer Africa is a positive for Russian investors. If Africa is properly managed, then the continent would succeed. Though Russia’s investment in Africa is not on the scale of China, it appears that Russian players have to identify the opportunities offered by the continent.

There is the need also to acknowledge that colonialism is not a new phenomenon and neither is it unique to Europeans. History documents examples of Europeans colonizing predominantly white territories in Europe. On the other hand, we must disabuse ourselves of the notion that colonialism is inherently exploitative. Most people would prefer sovereignty to colonial rule, but the truth is that colonial status does not impede economic growth and some colonies in Africa experienced faster growth during the colonial era. We should give greater priority to good governance than national sovereignty. It is better to be under the rule of benevolent colonizers than to be the subject of a dictator.

As different global actors navigate the troubled geopolitical waters resulting from the attempted hegemonic shift in global power, it is important that neither the East, the West and its European allies nor Russia take Africa's support for granted. Quite recently George Nyongesa, a Senior Associate at the Africa Policy Institute in Nairobi, Kenya, and a Tutorial Fellow and PhD candidate at University of Nairobi, observed that Russia's ineffective policy strategies and challenges in implementing its policy goals are noticeable in many African countries.

Russia has long had cordial relations with many African countries thanks to ties established during the Soviet era. However, the nostalgia for the former Soviet Union is waning along with the generation of African leaders who benefited from it. This fact continues to undermine Russia's relevance and perceived usefulness to Africa, especially among the new crop of leaders. Generally, the younger African generations, who make up a sizable portion of the continent's population, grew up when Russia had only a semblance of the gravitas of the former Soviet Union.

Understandably, the invasion of Crimea (2014) and Ukraine (2022) has not done much to win Russia the respect of African countries. Besides, numerous new issues arose following the fall of the Soviet Union, and this seems to have overshadowed Russia's strategic position to work with Africa. Since then, a lot has been lost and no doubt other key powers especially the Westerners, Europeans and Asians have jumped in to fill the void, according to Nyongesa.

In a nutshell, it is imperative that Russia takes its foreign economic policy initiatives seriously as it seeks an assertive posture on the global stage, even as it juggles with its efforts to regain influence in Africa. In the past, anti-western rhetoric worked easy magic in building alignment, but currently majority of the continent is largely focused on democratization and economic emancipation.

For this reason, the United States, the European Union, and even the Gulf States discuss Africa from various angles, but their main focus is on how to establish their economic presence on the continent. For instance, following their previous EU-AU summit, both parties reached consensus on a number of infrastructure and investment projects. In particular, the EU already has an investment program that they claim would create links, not dependencies, at cost €300 billion (\$340 billion) to finance new investment initiatives that are similar to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

As competing global powers continue to court Africa, it is interesting to note that Russia rarely discusses the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The AfCFTA could, at the very least, provide a framework for economic diplomacy towards resetting commercial ties between Russia and Africa. As things currently stand, Russia's geopolitical stake in the continent of Africa is barely noticeable. For instance, Russian direct investment into Africa is

significantly less than that of Europe and North America, totaling less than 1%. Also, Russian direct assistance is scarce, largely symbolic and frequently takes the form of in-kind donations to humanitarian crises or forgiveness of debt. In addition, compared to Africa's large trading partners like Europe and the United States, trade between Russia and Africa in 2020 totaled \$14 billion, or about 2% of the continent's overall trade.

In summary, it seems the strongest aspect of Russia's relations with Africa should be robust economic cooperation. If Russia's foreign economic agency paid attention to AfCFTA, which promises to create a single borderless market, they would find numerous potential opportunities for "win-win" cooperation. It is Chinese strategic style, which challenges Western and European powers even as it capitalizes on localization, production and marketing of consumer goods and services across Africa. In addition, Chinese have widely engaged in upgrading infrastructure across Africa. These are simply not Russians priority, not much with sustainable development directions.

Despite several suggestions for peaceful resolution, African leaders are consistently asked to support Russia against Ukraine. Since the symbolic October 2019 gathering in Sochi, extremely little has happened. The fact-files show that 92 agreements and contracts worth a total of \$12.5 billion were signed, and before that pledges and promises still undelivered. For now, Russia continues its 'special military operation' in the former Soviet republic of Ukraine, works overwhelming against growing neo-colonial tendencies in Africa and intensifies efforts in strengthening its hyperbolic political dialogue with African leaders. In fact, African leaders have to understand that Russia is working towards attaining its global status and that is what matters most especially in the emerging multipolar world.

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